11:Levine Z-4,5 (1958-1961)1965 MP5 Amhara MP5

conventional Ge'ez honorific. Sanctity of the imperial office is an antique theme, deriving apparently from pagan ideas of divine kingship which were transplanted from South Arabia in the first millennium B.C. along with other aspects of Sabaean culture.[1] But the working ideology which has upheld this conception during the period of Amhara hegemony draws on Semitic motifs of later origin, motifs which received their classic formulation in the fourteenth century national epic, *Kebra Nagast* (*The Glory of Kings*).

The effect of the *Kebra Nagast* is to make the Ethiopian emperor both physical descendant and spiritual successor to the kings of Israel. The genealogical tie is argued by the legendary union of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon, whose offspring, Menelik I, is held to have fathered the line of royalty which allegedly ruled at Aksum and was restored in the thirteenth century. The transfer of religious mission is shown both in a prophetic dream attributed to Solomon, in which God's favor passes from Israel to Ethiopia, and in the story of Menelik's theft from Jerusalem of the most sacred symbol of the Judaic mission, the Ark of the Covenant.* Furthermore, while at the time the *Kebra Nagast* was written the Ethiopian monarch was presented as a friendly cousin of the "king of Rome"—an echo of the sixth-century alliance between Caleb of Ethiopia and Justin I of Byzantium[2]—thereafter he came to be regarded as successor to the latter as well, and hence the sole defender of the true Christian faith.

The Ethiopians have elaborated on this exalted conception of their monarchy in other literary forms.[3] In royal chronicles and hymns of praise which span seven centuries, the emperors are celebrated for superlative beauty and superhuman powers. In splendor of countenance they are likened to the sun; in awesomeness of power, to the lion; in religious character and divine force, to the kings of Israel and, at times, to God Himself.

In life as well as in literature the person of the emperor was clad with an aura of sanctity. Ethiopian subjects have had to prostrate themselves and refrain from lifting their eyes in his presence. An analogous show of deference was expected when they received royal messages from afar; the recipient had to hear the message outside his home, standing, and naked above the waist.[4] The emperors rarely permitted themselves to be seen in public, and were often secluded by curtains while eating or drinking. They were not addressed directly, but through an interlocutor. Zar'a Yā'qob, whose officers were said to have kissed the earth each time they heard the sound of his voice, carried the demand for social distance so far that pages attached to his court were not permitted to have contact with anybody from outside, and were put to death if they dared to fraternize with local inhabitants.[5]

* The orthodox still maintain that the original ark containing the stone tablets of the Law is located at Aksum. It is symbolized by the *tābot* found in every Ethiopian church.

11:Levine Z-4,5 (1958-1961)1965 MP5 Amhara MP5

643 • 17 Accession to the throne involved two rites, anointment by oil and bestowal of the crown. Authority to conduct these rites was vested in the Egyptian archbishop, the *abuna*. The formal coronation took place in a ceremony for which in former times it was expected that the parties repair to the ancient sanctuary of Aksum. The change in status brought about through [551] coronation was symbolized by the assumption of a new name, as, for example, Rās Tafari Makonnen became Haile Selassie I. The royal insignia included a ring, worn on the right ear; the royal flag, the staff of which bore a cross resting on a ball; and special drums, trumpets, and flutes.[6] Also included was a red silk parasol known as *zhān ṭelā* (origin of the present-day Amharic word for umbrella). When the emperor was in procession they included a white horse with small silver bells at his head, a silver shield, and a white headband of muslin or fine silk.[7]

Successors to the throne were not determined according to a fixed rule like primogeniture. Membership in the Solomonian line was normally a prerequisite, and the unsuccessful reign of Yoṣṭos (1711–16) demonstrates the hazards of rule when no pretense to such affiliation could be maintained. Usually, however, there were several legitimate candidates for the position, and the absence of fixed procedures for choosing among them has meant that the death of an emperor was often a time of confusion and political improvisation. At times the monarch designated his successor and swore the grandees of the realm to an oath of support, as when Menelik named Līj Iyāsu; at times a single powerful lord, like Rās Mikā'ēl Sehul at Gondar, was the effective king-maker; at times the judgment and interests of a number of potentates, including on occasion the queen mother, were determinant.

The role of the emperor was largely symbolic, a quality which André Caquot has stressed.

> The king is guarantor of peace and prosperity for his entire country. Here the superhuman virtue attributed to the sovereign by the Ethiopian royal ideology manifests itself most clearly. It is not so much a question of his administering the country politically as it is that he guarantee order by his very presence and the virtue inherent in him.[8]

The idea that the mere presence of the monarch was a guarantee of civil order is reflected in the idiom *agara negus* ("country of a king"), which means a tranquil land. Related to this conception is the requirement that the body of the emperor be devoid of any physical defect or deformity, so that the well-being of the body politic may be properly symbolized.

But during most of Ethiopia's history the emperor was by no means merely an awesome figurehead, aloof from the works and turmoil of his realm. It was customary for him to serve the society actively in a number of ways. He had to organize the defense of the country and lead troops into battle—if

11:Levine Z-4,5 (1958-1961)1965 MP5 Amhara MP5

necessary, to die on the battlefield, as did Galāwdēwos, Yohānnes IV, and others. He had to maintain a minimum of political order, balancing off contending ambitions and subduing rebellious elements. Another important function was that of ultimate arbiter in judicial disputes.* As guardian of the church, moreover, he was active in endowing monasteries and churches and in resolving doctrinal disputes among the clergy.

To carry out these and related functions the emperor needed great wealth and political power. When the monarchy was intact he could command wealth from many sources: from the country-wide land tax (*gĭber*), in the form of honey, grain, or livestock, or such special fiscal assignments as saddles, plowshares, spears, ink, or tent pegs;[9] from assessed tithes on produce; in tribute from subject peoples, either in currency (gold, salt bars, etc.) or in kind; in revenues from traders; and from gifts from new appointees and hopeful office seekers. In theory, moreover, all the land of the empire belonged to its ruler; and, in fact, a good part of it was at his direct disposal, either for cultivation as royal estates or to distribute as compensation to those who served him.

The political power of the emperor was grounded in his command of troops supported by the royal bounty. In addition, he could command the troops of all the lords subject to his authority. Through frequent tours around the country he was able to reassert his hegemony from time to time in distant regions. But even from afar, a strong monarch could usually exert great control thanks to his authority to appoint or demote at a moment's notice any officer of the realm. As Alvares observed:

> No great lord of lands, if he is in them, can leave them, or set out for the Court on any account without being summoned by the [emperor]; and being summoned he will not fail to come for any reason. And when he sets out from the land of which he is the lord, he does not leave either wife or children or any property there, because he goes away in the expectation of never returning, since . . . [the emperor] gives when he pleases, and takes away when he pleases.[10]

The ideology of sacred monarchy served to legitimate theoretically boundless demands for wealth and power as well as to provide identity and morale for the body politic. It justified, too, occasional "deviant" behavior on the part of the monarch, virtually the only person with sufficient authority to innovate in this intensely conservative culture. The emperor has always been a primary agent of cultural innovation in Abyssinia, from the time of Ēzānā, who adopted Christianity in the fourth century; to Zar'a Yā'qob in the fifteenth

* To this day Haile Selassie devotes several hours a week to hearing court appeals in a session known as *chelot*.

11:Levine Z-4,5 (1958-1961)1965 MP5 Amhara MP5

643 17 century, who instituted a number of monthly holidays and prescribed new liturgical texts; to Menelik, who introduced vaccination and the eucalyptus tree in the twentieth century. For more than a century now kings and emperors [461] have attempted to combat the traditional Abyssinian repugnance for manual labor by themselves engaging in arduous physical work on numerous occasions.[11] Haile Selassie has followed a pattern with abundant precedents in introducing the many changes which have characterized his reign.[12]

As object of Abyssinia's highest esteem, symbol of its most cherished values, possessor of supreme wealth and power, and author of new norms, the emperor of Ethiopia thus qualifies as an elite in the more technical, sociological sense of the word as well as in its original sense of "being chosen."[13] Indeed, if more extreme interpretations of the emperor's significance are to be credited, he might even be viewed as the fountainhead of high status for all other elites. Thus Bruce, in a famous passage, declares:

> The Kings of Abyssinia are above all laws. They are supreme in all causes, ecclesiastical and civil; the land and persons of all their subjects are equally their property and every inhabitant of the kingdom is born their slave; *if he bears a higher rank it is by the king's gift; for his nearest relations are accounted nothing better.* [Italics mine.][14]

Such an interpretation, however, is more ideological than analytic. Throughout Ethiopian history one can discern definite limits to royal authority, and bases of elite status other than imperial favor.

121 643 17 It is true, as Margery Perham ably sets forth, that a primitive state of technology and severe geographical obstacles prevented the realization of imperial power to the degree that the royal ideology would have permitted.[15] Yet this failure of the monarchy "to build up any kind of administrative framework through which to exercise the absolute powers with which, by tradition and consent, it was endowed" was not simply a matter of wanting techniques. It also reflected the importance of ultimate values other than that of anointed royalty in Abyssinian culture.

121 643 17 111 The primary sociological limit to imperial authority was the commitment of the Abyssinian people to the tradition of their church. Religious conversion was one change which, at least in the period of Amhara hegemony, could no longer be tolerated. Za Dengel (1603–4) and Susneyos (1607–32) were brought down because of their forthright conversion to Catholicism, and the overthrow of Lĭjj Iyāsu in 1917 was legitimated on the alleged grounds that he had become a practicing Muslim. The decline in power of Tēwodros II (1855–68) was due in no small measure to the fact that his cavalier policy toward the clergy resulted in his being branded an enemy of the church.

121 643 17 A second limit on imperial authority lay in the perennial tendency of certain regional families to become endowed with an aura of legitimacy in their

11:Levine Z-4,5 (1958-1961)1965 MP5 Amhara MP5

own right. Indeed, the record of rebellions by nobility as well as clergy against the emperors of Ethiopia bespeaks a persisting dualism in the Abyssinian's disposition toward the monarchy itself. In principle, the emperor is reverenced. Widely held is the sentiment expressed in the *Kebra Nagast:* "It is not a good thing for any of those who are under the dominion of a king to revile him, for retribution belongeth to God."[16] But unquestioning deference is by no means necessarily coupled with unswerving loyalty. The Abyssinian pattern differs from the Japanese, in which total loyalty to the divine monarch calls for suicide in the wake of any disgrace one might have brought upon him. The norms of fealty to the emperor have not been so deeply internalized in Ethiopia, where the pardon and reinstatement of rebels has been a common occurrence. Among Abyssinians a veneer of genuine deference has often concealed an inner consciousness of disaffection, enabling the individual to act out rebellious wishes when the opportunity or need arises. Indeed, this ambivalence has been one of the traditional impulses behind the culture pattern of wax and gold.

The Old Nobility

The Abyssinians themselves acknowledge the existence of, in addition to the emperor, two groups of persons with pre-eminent status. These are called, both in Ge'ez and Amharic, the *makuánnent,* or "nobility," and the *kähenät,* or "clergy." While believing the presence of a king to be a precondition of civil order, they also regard the presence of these other elites as necessary for their good life. This attitude is expressed in the Amharic saying: "Fertility of the land [is] through the *makuánnent;* the splendor of the church [is] through the *kähenät.*"[17]

The term *makuánnent* may be used to refer to all secular dignitaries between the emperor and the well-to-do landowning peasantry. In strict contemporary usage, however, the *makuánnent* should be distinguished from two other classes of personages, whom we may call the "royal nobility" and the "local nobility" or "gentry." The former consists of the immediate royal family (*negusäwi bétasab*) and more distant royal relatives (*masäfent*). Because of their kinship with the Solomonic line these have at times been referred to as "chiefs of Israel."[18] Although it was customary for each new king to exile all male relatives who were potential candidates for the Crown to a high mountain fortress, more distant relatives might hold provincial governorates, and women of the royal family sometimes played an important role in court politics and provincial administration. Members of the royal nobility have normally been distinguished by special titles: *äbëto* (now vulgarized as *äto,* "Mister"), *le'ul,* and *lïjj* for men; and *emëbët, le'elt,* and *wayzaro* (now vulgarized in the sense of "Mrs.") for women.

12:Young E-4,5 (1966) 1971 MP5 Amhara MP5
Begemder

17 The highlands of Begemder, Tigre, and Eritrea form

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the nucleus of Coptic Abyssinia. During the first millenium B.C., the indigenous Hamitic people of the cool plateau were repeatedly invaded from across the Red Sea, by pagan and Jewish immigrants from South Arabia. Within a millenium, the influence of these Semites spread over the northern highlands, producing a cultural synthesis more obviously Semitic than African.

In the fourth century, missionaries of the Syrian Christian Church arrived in the Kingdom of Axum. Axum, located near present-day Asmara, was then the greatest Abyssinian state, linked by trade with the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf, and by military expeditions with the Arabian peninsula. The Syrians converted the Axumite court to Christianity, an example which was subsequently followed by most people of the northern highlands. After the great schism at Chalcedon, the Ethiopian Church continued its ties with the Orthodox faction, as a dependency of the Coptic See of Alexandria.

In the seventh and eighth centuries, however, Islamic conquest of Egypt and Nubia severed Ethiopia's commercial and ecclesiastical links with the Mediterranean world. Then, with the establishment of Muslim states, on the Red Sea littoral, Coptic Abyssinia became completly isolated from world Christendom. Thenceforth, the Christians of Abyssinia shared their greatest cultural intimacy, albeit often antagonistic, with the Muslim

12:Young E-4,5 (1966) 1971 MP5 Amhara MP5
Begemder

17 peoples who penetrated deep into the highlands, making many converts among the Christians. Even after the defeat of the Muslim armies in the sixteenth century and the subsequent rennaisance of the Ethiopian polity, relations with the Islamic world persisted, augmented now by the presence of Abyssinian Muslims permanently settled in the highlands.

755 787 793 177 Within the context of Ethiopian medicine, these widespread cultural affinities are most obvious in the works of the cleric healer (the *debtera*), and in the practices of the *zar* possession cult. For example, in their numerological operations, the *debtera*'s divinatory texts repeat the *gematria* manipulations of the Kabbalah, while the ideology which rationalized these formulations clearly reiterates the astrological lore of Islamic savants. 177 Similarly, affinities are obvious between Ethio- 778 pian and Islamic amulets, in their construction, in the design of talismanic devices, and in the ends for which 757 they are manufactured. Nor is evidence of the transla- 177 tion of Islamic medical treatises into Ge'ez and Amharic 539 lacking. Here, however, these works, particularly regarding humoral theory, have enjoyed only a very limited diffusion, and have been subordinated to indigenous medi- 787 cal notions. Finally, the *zar* cult, in whose coteries many of Begemder's women belong, is no local phenomenon, but appears in one form or another throughout this entire culture area.